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ADAM MAGAZINE, Volume 10, No. 11, November 1966 issue. Published monthly by Knight Publishing Corp. Business Offices: 8060 Melrose, Los Angeles, Calif. 90046. Editorial material to: P.O. Box 69912, Los Angeles, California 90069. Contents Copyright © 1966 by Knight Publishing Corporation. Representatives for Western Europe: A. B. Algemeen Boekbedrijf, Middenweg 175, Postbus 4134, Amsterdam —O. Holland. Nothing may be reprinted in whole or in part without written permission. Printed in the U.S.A. Return postage should accompany unsolicited manuscripts and pictures: the publisher accepts no responsibility for return. Any similarity between people and places mentioned in the fiction and semi-fiction in this magazine and any real people and places is purely coincidental.



The Silver Backside

By Jack Ritchie



"Mirror, Mirror,
on the wall,"
she kept asking.
And he knew
the final,
ultimate answer...

METTA SMILED at me. "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

"You are," I said. "Now damn it, go out and get that formula filled."

"In time," she said. "In time."

I had never been a mirror before and if I ever got out of this mess I certainly intended never to be one again.

"Didn't it ever occur to you to come to earth as a person?" Metta asked.

"I considered it. But for observation purposes I felt that becoming an inanimate object was much more suitable. It would not inhibit the objects of my study."

"But people have more fun."

"I'm not interested in fun," I said. "I am working on what you earth people might call my Ph.D. thesis. When I did my M.A. I

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was a frieze at the public library."

"But now you're a mirror and you're stuck with it?"

"I think it's the quicksilver," I said. "I just can't get out."

"What do you look like where you come from?"

"I don't look like anything," I said.

"I am an area. A floating vortex of intelligence immune to the human frailties of hate and love and fear. I dwell in a region where there are no wars."

"Are there other vortexes?"

"Of course."

"Tell me," she said. "Do you ever have boundary disputes?"

"Well," I said, "come to think of it, some of those vortexes are awful pushy."

She sat down on the bed and began slipping on her stockings. "You're really quite the best thing ever to happen to me. I'm very grateful."

"But evidently not grateful enough to release me?"

"I'll get you out of there," she said. "Eventually."

"The formula is simple," I said. "You should be able to purchase the ingredients at any drugstore. As a matter of fact, I suspect that they are to be found in any number of common household products. You merely rub them on my surface and I am free."

"Have a little more patience," she said. "Another six months ought to do it."

When she finished dressing and applying her makeup, she blew a kiss in my direction. "Be good. I'll be back at about eleven."

"You always are," I said.

It was about a quarter to eleven when she returned.

The man with her was perhaps forty, rather squat, and beginning to bald.

Metta turned on the lamps. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Sure," he said. "I guess I could use one more at that."

She disappeared into the livingroom and returned with two glasses.

He looked about the room. "Kind of bright here, isn't it?"

Metta smiled. "I prefer things that way. Do you mind?"

He was eager. "No complaints. None at all."

During the next hour I watched them.

Finally at twelve, he left.

Metta slipped into a dressing gown and went to her bureau. She took out the card index file and extracted a fresh card. She began writing.

"Who was he?" I asked.

"Jerome T. Norton," she said. "Owner of a chain of supermarkets in Oregon. A wife and two children."

She finished the card and came toward me. "Did you get the pictures?"

"Yes," I said. "I got the pictures." I deposited the camera on the palm of her hand.

It is maddening. I am able to absorb and use the camera and expel it at will, but as for my own being and identity, I was still hopelessly imprisoned.

She removed the film. "Norton ought to be good for about five hundred a month."

"Just how many cards do you intend to fill? You have twenty-two already."

"About another twenty more. Possibly thirty."

"Blackmail is despicable," I said.

She nodded. "But it beats working in a dime store."

"I am considering refusal to cooperate any further."

"Then you'll stay in that mirror forever."

showered, and dressed. "I'm going shopping. And don't try talking to the new maid or you'll regret it."

Hilda came in at ten. She was in her fifties, graying, and extremely efficient.

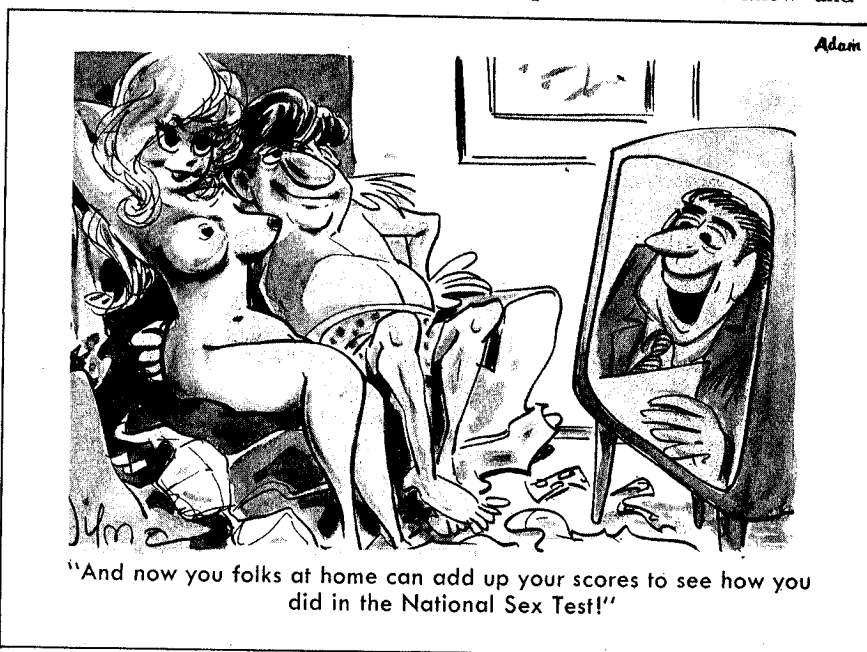
Olga had been quite the opposite, dusting only here and there.

In a moment of desperation a week ago, I had spoken to her.

She had fainted and when she recovered, she had fled.

Metta learned of the incident and threatened to smash me to bits if ever again I attempted to communicate with another human being.

Frankly the threat had frightened me. I knew that simply smashing me to bits would not release me. I was part and parcel of the mirror and if I were fragmented into hundreds of slivers, would that result in multiple schizophrenia? I didn't know and I



ever." She put some new film into the camera and handed it back to me.

I had acquired the earth habit of sighing and I did so now. "Who's next on your list? Or don't you know?"

"His name is Williams," Metta said.

"A friend of Norton's. He's coming to town this week or possibly the next."

"Norton will undoubtedly warn him off."

She smiled. "I don't intend to begin blackmailing Norton until I have Williams in the net too."

She turned off all the lights but the one on the nightstand. Then she removed the dressing gown and lay on the bed. She stretched lazily. "What do you vortexes do for kicks?"

"We think," I said. "Pure thought is the noblest exercise in the universe."

"Oh, sure," she said. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

In the morning she woke at nine,

preferred to play it safe.

Now I watched Hilda as she went about her work. She dusted and vacuumed at a steady, unflagging pace.

And then she approached me with a rag and a can.

Olga had never bothered to clean me.

Hilda rubbed some of the liquid on my surface.

It was rather soothing. As a matter of fact, I felt suddenly light and...

I glanced at the label on the can.

METTA ADJUSTED the mirror so that it overlooked the bed.

She turned and smiled. "You say you're in plastics, Mr. Williams?"

I was now six foot two and weighed one-ninety.

"That's right, baby," I said.

I began unbuttoning my shirt. ❀